

**Improving Students' Learning Outcomes  
- Curriculum and practices at CBS**

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# Improving Students' Learning Outcomes - Curriculum and practices at CBS

*By Claus Nygaard and Bente Kristensen*

## Abstract

Copenhagen Business School (CBS) has formulated a learning strategy that places students' learning at the centre of all teaching activities. This article uses CBS' learning strategy to demonstrate the close relationship between curriculum development and students' learning outcomes. It shows how such strategies for institutional quality work are implemented in practice. The case and discussion is relevant to three audiences: 1) deans and key decision makers interested in overall policy making that defines the scope of study programmes; 2) academics responsible for curriculum development; 3) academics interested in improving students' learning outcomes.

## Introduction

This article reflects on the ongoing work at Copenhagen Business School to improve students' learning outcomes through curriculum development and changed practices of students and teachers. It is a part of the increasing debate of quality enhancement at Higher Educational Institutions (HEIs) and concerns the changes from an input-based to an output-based educational model (Rassow, 1998), where focus is on students' development of transferable skills (Harvey, et al., 1992; Harvey & Knight, 1996; Bennett, 2002) relevant for the job market (Harvey & Green, 1994; Falconer & Pettigrew, 2003).

This article has three main sections. First we briefly explain the overall focus of the quality work at CBS, which is done to help the reader contextualize the practices described. Second we explain the ongoing work with improving students' learning outcomes at CBS, which is done with reflections on CBS' learning strategy, curriculum development, teacher training and general aspects of quality enhancement surrounding teaching and learning activities. Third we reflect on the normative aspects of the quality work at CBS, which is done to discuss contextual aspects surrounding the implementation of quality enhancement initiatives on institutional level.

## Section 1: Quality work at CBS

CBS is the largest business school in northern Europe. It was founded in 1917 as a private business school, and remained private until 1965, when it was integrated into the Danish national system of higher education. Today CBS, like seven other public universities in Denmark, receives its funding from the state.

Student population	15,791
Full-time students (non-Danish citizens)	1,534
Full-time academic staff	427
Visiting professors	21
Part-time academic staff	707

PhD students	168
Administrative staff	548
Funding (million Euro)	127.7
Exchange agreements with foreign universities	360
Undergraduate study programmes	13
Graduate study programmes	27
Study programmes at Open university	9
Executive masters study programmes	11

Figure 1: Key figures for CBS (ultimo 2008).

CBS is a single faculty university, which means that quality work is concentrated within departments, research centres and study boards with a relatively similar academic focus, all centred on related aspects of business administration and business economics. CBS offers degree programmes at the following levels:

- BSc programmes (3 year full time undergraduate)
- MSc programs (2 year full time graduate)
- CBS Graduate Diploma programmes (2 year part time)
- CBS Executive programmes (1-2 year full time/part time)
- PhD programmes (3 year full time/5 year part time doctorate)

In order to coordinate and enhance the quality of CBS's study programmes, CBS Learning Lab was founded in 1994. It is a professional research-based centre working with quality enhancement at CBS. The centre is attached as a staff unit to the President's Office and works as an intermediary between departments, study programmes and student organisations. The employees at CBS Learning Lab holds the role of researchers/consultants or consultants. Together they work within three domains: 1) consultancy 2) competence development 3) development of new knowledge and methods. Below is a description of the three domains.

Consultancy	Competence development	Development of new knowledge and methods
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• curriculum development</li> <li>• from teaching to learning</li> <li>• pedagogical issues</li> <li>• supervision</li> <li>• e-learning (design and implementation)</li> <li>• project management</li> <li>• task forces and project groups</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• courses for teachers and administrative staff</li> <li>• supervision of teachers, supervisors and examiners</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• national and international research projects</li> <li>• articles</li> <li>• books</li> <li>• white papers</li> </ul>

Figure 2: The Focus of CBS Learning Lab.

The primary aim of CBS Learning Lab is to work for a continuous enhancement of quality in study programmes and teaching methods at CBS. In order to do this, consultants engage in research, particularly research to develop new knowledge about the relationship between competence development, learning processes and the role of new technology in HE. Moreover, they engage in competence development of teachers, course coordinators, members of study boards and administrative staff. They give advice about pedagogical and technological development in all study programmes at CBS. CBS Learning Lab also offers professional project management of larger development projects such as the development of new curricula or the development of curricula based on e-learning concepts or virtual space learning. This is done by engaging in a close dialogue with study boards, curriculum directors and course coordinators to ensure that CBS Learning Lab is able to service the needs of the study programmes in the best possible way.

The quality work at CBS has three interwoven aims. First, on the organisational level, it aims at institutionalising a quality culture, in order to promote the development of CBS as a learning university. Second, on the personal level, it aims at stimulating self-reflection and change management, which are important for promoting the exchange of ideas and experiences and for sharing good practice. Third, on the operational level, it aims to create study programmes that are second to none in the respect that they actively empower students, promote their development of higher order thinking skills, and enhance their employability. Under a broad heading this is explained as “Improving Students’ Learning Outcomes” (Nygaard et al., 2009).

The third aim is not surprising: such outcome-based statements are the backbone of curricula at almost every university. The fact, however, that we actively promote the institutionalisation of aims at organisational and personal levels, shows that we are genuinely interested in developing processes of QE throughout the university. In this way working with learning outcomes shifts from a political level to an institutional and operational level, where students’ learning processes are in focus rather than the political legitimacy stemming from the formulation of students’ learning outcomes.

In 2005, CBS was honoured as the Nordic university with the best quality work. In the competition were University of Kuopio, Finland; University of Uppsala, Sweden; Norwegian University of Life Sciences, Norway; and Copenhagen Business School, Denmark. An international panel of quality experts identified the following strengths at CBS:

- a coherent quality system, systematically applied;
- an established quality culture;
- good involvement of stakeholders;
- the Learning Lab initiative and the students’ involvement in its inception and management;
- effective use of results from quality reviews and processes for the dual purpose of quality improvement and organisational learning;
- use of the above for opening up a high level of dialogue between staff and

- between staff and students;
- a strong focus on student outcomes;
- effective feedback loops;
- transparent information.

Figure 3: Identified strengths of the quality work at CBS (Omar & Liuhanen, 2005:27).

Having briefly touched on the overall strategy of CBS in relation to quality in teaching and learning, let us turn to the second section of the article dealing with the ongoing work of improving students' learning outcomes at CBS.

## **Section 2: Improving Students' Learning Outcomes at CBS**

When one sets out to work on improving students' learning outcomes, an immediate question concerns the notion of learning itself. At CBS, a learning strategy has been formulated, which abandon the view that students learn when teachers transfer knowledge to them. Student learning requires cognitive and social activities of students. Student learning is about knowledge creation, transformation of knowledge into skills, and application of qualifications to solve a problem that, in practice, is recognised as being competent. The learning strategy of CBS is based on a social-psychological approach to learning, which focuses on ways in which social conditions (the learning context) affect student behaviour (the ways in which students engage in their own learning projects). The central tenets of CBS' learning strategy are stated as follows:

1. Basically, learning is the construction and maintenance of meaning.
2. Learning is the ability to doubt and to question one's own assumptions.
3. Learning involves acquiring new personal knowledge, skills and competencies that can be used to resolve forthcoming challenges in life.
4. Learning is both individual and social.
5. Learning is contextual in the sense that it is embedded in ongoing systems of social relations and is affected by the identity and social position of the learner.
6. Learning contexts change through time and space. Each new combination of students, teachers, technologies and media constitutes a new learning context; each context will affect the learning process of the individual student.

Figure 4: CBS Learning Philosophy (CBS Learning Lab, 2005).

Improving students' learning outcomes requires that the curriculum focuses on students' study and learning methods, and as such is seen as an elaborate learning-centred action plan rather than as a syllabus alone. In practice these six statements about learning has an immediate value in this process, as they enable study program directors, study boards, teaching staff, faculty members, student organisations, students and CBS Learning Lab's consultants to address curriculum development from a learning-centred point of view and thus work actively with improving students' learning outcomes. In the long run, ongoing dialogues about quality in teaching and learning may even create a culture where it becomes natural of teachers and curriculum developers to focus on students' learning outcomes rather than distributing academic content to students.

## **Section 3: Normative aspects of institutional quality work**

Although suggesting an overall model for curriculum development, this is not to imply that the model alone makes an improvement of students' learning outcomes. We argue, however, that some overall aspects will help develop and implement a learning-centred curriculum that improves students' learning outcomes:

1. Be prepared to rethink students' learning processes. Regard the students as active participants rather than passive recipients.
2. Be prepared to implement new teaching- and learning activities, and be prepared that such will affect and change already established institutional practices.
3. Be prepared to assign new roles to students, teachers, administrators, departments, study boards, faculties and management.
4. Be prepared to assess from several dimensions, not whether teaching has been well received, but whether learning has actually taken place.

Figure 5: Readiness in relation to curriculum development (Nygaard et al., 2009).

It is our belief that if the curriculum is developed in such ways that it takes serious the concept of learning and recognises that learning takes place in a social setting and is contextually bound, it will help improve students' learning outcomes.

### **Conclusion:**

In this article we have argued that a learning-centred curriculum is a fruitful and plausible way to secure the improvement of students' learning outcomes. Learning-centred educations see the curriculum as *a learning-centred action plan*. The benefit of this approach is that learning of students' takes place as an action-reflection-learning process where theory and practice is interlinked through a case based pedagogy. By this we believe that students learn to solve real life problems and at the same time learn to reflect their own learning process. They "learn to learn" so to speak. It has not been our intention to cover all possible aspects of the learning-centred curriculum, but to sketch some of the most important aspects underlying its philosophy. Doing so we have also given examples of how this is done at CBS. This has been introduced to inspire others to work with the development of learning-centred curriculum which ideally will improve students' learning outcomes.

### **References:**

Bibliography is to follow.